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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 001285

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [INR](#) [PHUM](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: BATTLE LINES DRAWN FOR DECEMBER ELECTIONS

REF: A. LA PAZ 1256
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 496

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires John Creamer, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: With the passage of the September 7 filing deadline, eight parties have registered to contest the December 6 elections for Bolivia's presidency and Plurinational Assembly (Congress). Three parties are set to split the bulk of the opposition vote, greatly strengthening President Morales's already-strong prospects for re-election. Morales's ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party is likely to maintain control of the Assembly's lower house, but the opposition still has a (slim) chance to keep control of the Senate. End summary.

Four Main Candidates

[1](#)2. (SBU) After an eventful week in which three of six leading opposition candidates dropped out of the presidential race -- briefly raising expectations that the opposition might form a unified front against President Morales -- on September 7 Morales's ruling MAS party and three leading opposition parties officially registered for the December 6 national elections. In addition to President Morales, La Paz-based business leader Samuel Doria Medina, former Cochabamba Mayor Manfred Reyes Villa, and Potosi Mayor Rene Joaquin declared their candidacies. Four other parties also registered, but none is considered likely to have a significant impact.

Cardenas Out, Lambasts Opposition Options

[1](#)3. (C) Former Vice President Victor Hugo Cardenas and former President Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga both dropped out of the race in the final days leading up to the registration deadline. Quiroga admitted he had lost popular and financial support in his former stronghold of Santa Cruz and could not afford to go forward. Cardenas publicly stated that he did not want to splinter the opposition and was leaving the race for the country's greater good. Cardenas told Poloff privately, however, that he viewed Doria Medina as too close to the MAS and Reyes Villa's advisors as too corrupt. "If Doria Medina loses, he will still have to work with the MAS on roads and

infrastructure projects; he cannot afford to be too critical," said Cardenas.

14. (C) Cardenas' complaints summarize popular concerns about the two principal opposition candidates. Doria Medina is viewed as running as much to save his large cement business from nationalization as to lead the country, while Reyes Villa and his team are seen as prone to cronyism and corruption. Reyes Villa worked in various capacities with former dictators Luis Garcia Meza and Hugo Banzer as well as expelled former President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, all of which the MAS is expected to exploit during the campaign. On September 8, in comments to the press, Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera echoed Cardenas' private remarks, labeling Doria Medina as "the democratic right" (presumably, the MAS's preferred opposition) and Reyes Villa "the authoritarian right."

Presidency Not in Danger

15. (SBU) Even if Doria Medina and Reyes Villa campaign well against Morales, their fracturing of the opposition vote seems to guarantee President Morales' re-election. Polls and Embassy contacts point to a Morales win with a percentage similar to his 2005 victory, when he won with 53 percent of the vote. With a relatively strong economy and the solid backing of the country's indigenous and working-class populations, Morales remains very popular, dominating every opinion survey. Together, Doria Medina and Reyes Villa could take perhaps as much as 40 percent of the vote. The only other significant candidate, Rene Joaquin, has not polled well nationally and is likely to garner support only in his home region of Potosi. Of the four other candidates, former MAS founder Roman Loayza has the potential to take votes away from Morales from the left, but polls have shown his support at no more than two percent. The other three candidates have barely registered in polls, and their campaigns could take away as much support from the opposition candidates as from President Morales.

Senate Still in Play?

16. (SBU) The presidential race will likely result in a decisive Morales victory, but the race for overall control of the Senate -- where all 36 seats are in play -- is closer (septel). Initial polling and Embassy contacts indicate the three leading opposition candidates could ally to give the MAS a fight. While the MAS is the dominant party nationwide, Reyes Villa, Doria Medina, and Joaquin each have pockets of regional support that could add up to a significant number of Senate seats.

17. (SBU) Reyes Villa could do well in Chuquisaca, Cochabamba, Beni, and Pando, while Doria Medina could win seats in La Paz (his home department), Oruro, Santa Cruz, and Tarija. Joaquin's Alianza Social party is not likely to do well anywhere but in Potosi, but his party could win two Senate seats there. If the opposition candidates do not cannibalize each other's support, together they could challenge what many say is a 20 to 16 lead for the MAS. A secondary (and more realistic) objective for the opposition is to deny the MAS the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution further.

Comment

18. (C) In discussions with a range of opposition senators, representatives, and past government members, the mood is bleak, with many predicting MAS control of both houses of the Plurinational Assembly and a Morales presidential landslide. We view this as the most likely scenario, especially given the opposition's inability to unite under a common banner. Still, the final constellation of opposition candidates has a slim chance of stopping the MAS drive to win the Senate. Some give Reyes Villa, a pugnacious and fiery campaigner, a

chance to capture seats that would otherwise turn to the MAS.

Barring some extraordinary, unexpected development, however, Bolivia seems headed for five years of unfettered MAS control of government. End comment.

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